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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST FOR THE MINISTER'S PREACHING

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Preaching is distinctly an appeal to human life. For its purpose the point of contact is everything. It must grip the hearer in the actual problems of his life, or it is in vain. It must take account of his modes of speech and forms of thought, that it may not fail to make connection with them. The true preacher is searching the universe every week for material which he can forge into a sermon that will thus reach men. He is ever lighting his lamp and sweeping the house and searching diligently until he finds that precious thing. It matters not whether in the Old Testament or in the Middle Ages, or in India or China, or in the events of the current week, or in the struggle of life in his own soul or in the souls of others; wherever he may find it, he is bound to use it.

And now the question before us is: What material for preaching does one find today in that which the name Jesus Christ represents? I say, in that which his name represents, for the preaching value of anything is measured by that which it stands for to the minds of the people to whom one is speaking, the ideas it calls up within them, the kind of appeal it makes to them. If, for example, the name "Jesus Christ" represented to men only what is left of our certain knowledge of him after some of the destructive critics have been through the gospels, there would not be much preaching value in it. Or, if it were a name toward which people were indifferent in their feeling, its preaching value would not be what it is. But, as a matter of fact, the name of Christ has come to represent in the minds of the people to whom we are speaking today so much that is vital and inspiring, so much that answers to their deepest needs and is in line with their highest visions, that its preaching value is incomparably great. The authority of the Bible as such is not what it used to be over the minds of the people. The authority of

the church is nothing like what it used to be. But the authority of Christ stands unimpaired. To the minds of men he is ever "the Master." The widespread response to the question, "What would Jesus do?" indicates the spell which his name casts today over the hearts of men. If we can claim for a line of conduct or an attitude of mind the authority of the word and example of Jesus, that fact in itself constitutes a very powerful appeal to men. The word and example of no other character in history go so far.

There are two quite different ways in which the preacher finds himself drawing heavily upon the name and personality of Christ today. The one has to do with Jesus as a character of history; the other has to do with the Divine Spirit apprehended under the name of Christ in the personal religious experience of the believer. In all careful thinking these two must be kept distinct; and I shall accordingly consider each of them briefly by itself.

1. The historic Jesus. The thing that impresses men most deeply about Jesus today is the principles of life for which he stood and the way in which he stood for them. The preaching value of the story of Jesus for present-day audiences is turning less and less upon questions relating to his rank in the scale of being, or to any extraordinary powers that he possessed, or to any circumstances attending his entrance into the world or his departure from it. The fact that there are wide differences of opinion among the hearers on these matters would in itself render them largely unavailable as a basis of preaching. But even were that not the case, these are not the aspects of Jesus that make the strongest appeal to men today. The scientist or the theologian may interrogate a mighty work of Jesus in order to understand how it was that he was able to do it. The preacher is rather concerned with the moral meaning of the act, the qualities of character it reveals, and the attitude toward life which it discloses. What things were they that looked large to Jesus, and what things looked small to him?—that is the question which most deeply concerns us. And it is a question whose answer lies so large and plain upon the face of the gospel records, that there seems to be no serious disagreement about it. It is the nature of these things for which Jesus stood, together with that popular recognition of his authority to which I have already referred, that makes

his words and deeds beyond all comparison the richest mine of preaching material which history affords.

From the preacher's standpoint, the positions which Jesus took may be divided roughly into two classes—those that are *popular*, and those that are *not popular*, in the world today.

Some of the things for which Jesus stood are distinctly in line with the dominant trend of feeling among us. For example, his frankness and sincerity, his hatred of all pretense, his independence of custom and tradition, his assertion of personal liberty in thought and conduct, and his unfaltering and uncompromising loyalty to the convictions of his soul. These are things that awaken positive enthusiasm today. Other traits that make a similar appeal are his love for human beings as such, his assertion of the incomparable value of the individual life, the humblest as well as the highest, the child as well as the adult. And along with this must be mentioned his great and notable charity toward those who have fallen into sins of weakness and those who have not had a fair chance in life. Every time a preacher touches on any of these things, he strikes a responsive chord in the hearts of men. And the fact that there is so much material looking in these directions in the earliest records of the life of Jesus has contributed immensely to his popularity and authority in the modern world. It is not uncommon for men of generous enthusiasms and independent spirit, on opening the Synoptic Gospels, to be charmed and captivated with the figure of Jesus and introduce him to their friends with the greatest enthusiasm as a fresh discovery: "Here is a man after our own hearts! The things he stood for are the things we are standing for. He laid down his life because he believed in honesty, liberty, charity, and humanity. He is indeed our elder brother."

But there are other things for which Jesus stood that are not nearly so consonant with the spirit of our age, and yet are none the less valuable for the preacher, because they are needed as a wholesome corrective of present tendencies.

Such, for example, is his philosophy of meekness and gentleness, going even so far as the refusal to resist personal injury—an attitude which finds its supreme and consistent expression in the cross. Such, too, is his indifference to money and its power, his warnings

against the dangers connected with the pursuit of wealth, and his consistent choice of the simple life. These things are not at all in harmony with present-day ideals; and yet the appeal which they make, especially as illustrated in Jesus, is one which in our nobler moments we cannot resist. Men recognize that there is something diviner here than that spirit which is goading them on in the competitive struggle. And even in the midst of their inability wholly to extricate themselves, they feel that this voice of Jesus is the one they need to hear, and that through his spirit, rather than that which prevails about them, is to come the ultimate deliverance.

A similar thing may be said of some of the more distinctly religious qualities in Jesus. For instance, his life was one of serene and unquestioning dependence on a divine Power for daily help and guidance. He not only went through the world holding up a banner of high and perfect confidence in the essential goodness at the heart of things, but the Being whom he called "the Father" was to him a close and constant friend, to be depended on for the needs of every day and hour. Such an attitude can hardly be said to be characteristic of the world today, nor is it the dominant one in current religion. Prayer as a power, and God as a personal friend—these are things regarding which men have a wistful feeling today. There are difficulties and doubts in the way. We feel that we need something to help us to realize the supernatural. And the same may be said of the faith of men in the life of the soul beyond death—a faith which seems to have been like an axiom in the mind of Jesus. This is another thing regarding which we have a wistful feeling. We crave something here which shall strengthen our faith and hope. And it is a great help to the preacher to be able to point men to the attitude of Jesus on these points. "I go [he said] to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

Summing up our consideration of this aspect of the subject, it may be said that where our age is strong—in its enthusiasm over honesty, liberty, charity, humanity—Jesus was also strong; so that in these things there is a great sense of fellowship between us and him. And where our age is weak—in meekness, gentleness, sacrifice, unworldliness, and also in faith in the reality of the unseen—there Jesus was strong. So that in the morning one may so preach

that men shall say: "I love Jesus because *he* loved men, because *he* loved honesty and liberty and charity;" and in the evening one may so preach that men shall say: "I am going to care less for mammon and more for God, less for this world and more for worlds unseen, because Jesus, the great Master, thus shows me the path of life."

2. Turn we now from Jesus as a character of history to that peculiar mystical use of his name which from the days of Paul and John has been characteristic of the genius of Christianity.

By a profound spiritual instinct the followers of Jesus regarded the spirit of their risen Master as present with them, a constant guide and friend. Very much as he had depended on the One whom he called "my Father in heaven," they depended on the One whom they called "Christ Jesus our Lord." This spiritual instinct found its intellectual expression in the doctrine of the deity of Christ—a doctrine which, understood in the light of its origin, becomes perfectly comprehensible, and indeed psychologically necessary. For that spiritual influence which came so mightily over the apostles from the day of Pentecost—nay from the very morning of the resurrection—and which they called by the name of Christ, was something which might be, and indeed must be, freely identified with the Spirit of God. It is not with the theology of it that we are now concerned, but with the mystical symbolism which has become so firmly established by centuries of usage, and has so permeated our hymns and our liturgies, that it may be said to have become a part of the language of the Christian heart. The Christian centuries have hung the portrait of Jesus over the face of the Most High. If today we found it a veil to hide God from us, or a mask to distort his features, then were it a service to tear it away in the interest of truth. But I cannot feel that those who have tried to do that, sacrificing poetic feeling to prosaic intellectualism, have done us a service, or done essential truth a service. For it has been no veil or mask, this portrait of Jesus superimposed upon the face of God, but an incandescent medium through which shine forth to us those things in the heart of the Eternal which most we need to know.

There is a tendency for our conception of God to become vague, indefinite, impersonal; for the word "God" to mean simply a

supreme energy moving through all things. Of this tendency we are constantly made aware in the thought of today. The "great god Pan" threatens to engulf us; but there is no redemption, no deliverance, no leadership into a promised land, through the great god Pan. It is better far to say, "Jesus is God," than it is to say "Nature is God." They who have learned to pray to Christ, to trust in Christ, to depend upon him as a living presence, as a divine leader in the forward march of humanity, have achieved beyond any question the most ennobling and inspiring conception of God which the world has yet known. Historians and metaphysicians may say what they will about the reservations with which alone they can accept such a use of language. For our purpose as preachers it is enough to say that there is no name under heaven in which men may more worthily worship the Eternal. It saves us no end of description and definition when we are able to point to Jesus Christ and say: "We believe in the Christlikeness of God."

And the preacher who enters into the spirit of this historic symbolism of Christendom is able to make vital connection with that deeper religious life of our churches which centers about the experience of communion with a living Christ. He can preach Jesus not only as one who was, but as one who is. The cross of Christ he can proclaim, not simply or chiefly as an event that once occurred outside a city wall, but as the symbol of that principle of vicarious suffering which is in the very heart of the Eternal, and which runs like a silver thread through the whole experience of life. For no serious student can fail to acknowledge the sureness of spiritual insight which led the early Christians to lay hold of the element of vicarious love in the dying of Jesus and make it the central note in the new religion. "He died for us!" they cried; "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us!" The sharp knife of the Greek intellect might cut in pieces the statements in which they strove to express it and explain it; but the great fact remained that they had recognized in the dying of Jesus the consummate expression of that divine love which alone can save the world.

And not only can the preacher employ this historic symbolism, but he can preach a Christ who is ever near us and above us, bearing with us and suffering for us—a Christ whose indwelling in the

soul of every man is only another expression for the divine immanence.

From this point of view the whole story of Jesus becomes rich in symbolism which may be used in appealing to the spiritual life of men today. Such a scene as the storm on the lake—Jesus sleeping in the stern of the boat, and awaking to still the tempest—becomes the Christ slumbering in every man's soul, the indwelling Christ who must be awakened to take control of the life and bring harmony out of its discord. Such a way of speaking would not be possible regarding any other character in history; but in the case of Jesus it becomes possible and natural and wonderfully effective, owing to the way in which the Christian world has come to associate his name with the deepest religious experiences of the Divine Spirit.

One must recognize that there are certain types of mind to which this symbolic use of the name "Christ" is not congenial; and upon these it certainly must not be forced as essential. It is only of value where it is the natural and spontaneous symbolism of the heart.

I have tried in this brief and necessarily incomplete essay to indicate some of the ways in which it seems to me that the name of Christ has a deep and genuine, and I think also an increasing, significance for the work of the preacher. It is an ancient mine in which we are working. But so far is it from being exhausted that never has ore more rich in precious metals been taken from it than is being mined today. It is like those mountains of Colorado, covered with old diggings which after all have only scratched the surface. But it is not without meaning that those diggings are there. They mark the place where the veins run rich and deep, and with tunnel and shaft thousands of feet beneath the surface men are opening up their riches today. So it is with Christ. There are many abandoned diggings on this mountain-side—the sacramental Christ, the theological Christ, the expiatory Christ, the miraculous Christ. But the veins these old diggings mark run very deep and very rich. And the diggings of today, beginning low down in obscure gulches at the foot of the mountain—the human Christ, the son made like unto his brethren—cross the same veins at many points, and take from them ore which under new names reveals an undiminished value when brought to its final assay in the laboratory of human experience.